Futuwwa

Virtue against Authority
in the Islamic Middle Ages

Introduction

Where do we go in search of models for an ethical existence? In the moral hell-scape that is 21st century capitalism, this question appears almost quaint. ¨Morality¨ seems to us like a pursuit for conservative preachers and corrupt politicians. We are actively discouraged from thinking of ourselves as moral beings; the only obligation we have towards other people is, at best, to avoid direct harm, and at worse to find new and creative ways to scam and exploit them. The left tends to defer the question to some utopian post-revolutionary future. Interpersonal ethics, they say, is the opposite of structural analysis. In the absence, grifters and conmen show up to tell young people – particularly young men – that virtue lies in self-reliance and the pursuit of personal power at the expense of others. And, of course, in their overpriced online courses and nutritional supplements.

The result is that we find ourselves increasingly isolated, individualized, and completely powerless. We have lost the skills necessary to maintain strong social bonds able to withstand outside threats, just as the outside threats of imperialism, capitalism, and the industrial war machine are at the height of their global ascendancy.

Where do we go in our search for alternatives? This zine suggests that there is value in looking to the past to uncover forgotten models of building powerful communities and fostering strong bonds of solidarity. More specifically, I want to return to look at a formative moment in the historical development of the modern state system – the Middle Ages, particularly in the Islamic world. In the incredibly messy and multilayered process of developing an Islamic state, many alternative political forms emerged, and became the subject of fierce debates. These debates touched on much the same topics we are dealing with today – the nature of power and authority, the role of violence in the process of forming and defending communal life, and how such questions intersect with fault lines of identity such as gender, class and ethnic background.

A full history of this process is obviously beyond the scope of a single zine. Instead, I want to focus on a certain concept which bound a lot of the debates together in a single thread, and elicited critical engagements with questions of virtue, authority and community, from the Iberian peninsula all the way to Iran and beyond. This is the concept of *futuwwa*.

The literal translation of *futuwwa* into English is something like ¨youth¨, the quality of being a *fata* [f. *fatat* pl. *fityan*], literally an ¨energetic and upstanding young person.¨ Historians who dealt with the term, however, have tended to translate it into the term ¨chivalry,¨ pointing at the many commonalities it had with this European concept. Neither is fully correct, however. As I´ll show in this text, the concept of *futuwwa* encompassed a variety of social forms throughout its many years of currency, as well as a set of ideals of behavior associated with those social forms. These ideas had complex relations with the power of both dynastic states and their security forces as well with that of Muslim religious authorities.

But most importantly, they were ways of talking about what a virtuous life might look like in a historical context in which the political form of the centralized state was still relatively new. As I'll show in the following pages, the *fityan* and their allies – particularly the practitioners of mystical Islam known as the *sufis* – managed to create a counter-hegemonic ethical vision of radical egalitarianism and militant resistance to political tyranny which not only survived throughout the generations, but even successfully challenged the power of the Islamic states on numerous occasions. It´s therefore worth it for 21st century anarchists and revolutionaries to study the answers they came up with, and how they handled the growing competing power of the state in their lifetimes.

Let's be clear – this is not a call to adopt *futuwwa* ethics or social forms wholesale. That would be a pointless and reactionary project by definition. I will also point at several junctures throughout this zine at aspects of *futuwwa* that need to be re-examined, re-formulated or even completely rejected under our current historical context. The point of this is not to turn back time to some mythical virtuous past, but only to expand the historical record from which we might draw inspiration. Another, no less important, point is to find continuities and lines of mutual exchange specifically in the heritage of those regions and cultures currently being targeted by the US-led imperialist war machine.

So who were the *futuwwa*? Let's start with some history.

Origins

A variety of theories have been proposed for the historical origins of the concept of *futuwwa* and its Persian parallel, *jawanmardi*.

One popular theory places their origin in groups of Persian young male warriors of the lower landed nobility who were primarily employed in safeguarding the interests of the tax-collecting aristocracy. With the coming of the Muslim conquest in the 7th and 8th centuries AD, the warriors largely lost their social function. At first they were sometimes employed as mercenaries in the various battles which accompanied the spread of Islam through Persia, Mesopotamia and the Levant (present day Syria, Lebanon and Palestine), as well as in the various battles over control of these lands by competing Muslim dynasties. Over time, however, they became increasingly independent, and developed a moral and political ethos of their own, partly in response to the anti-Persian prejudices of the Umayyad caliphs. To survive and maintain this independence they turned to brigandry.*

Another theory suggests that the concept originated from the so-called *sa'alik* – nomadic Arabs who, for one reason or another, found themselves isolated from the tribal bonds that normally formed the basis for Bedouin communal life. These *sa'alik* also united together to form bands of mercenaries and brigands. Yet in the *sa'alik* poetry and stories preserved from pre-Islamic period they are often depicted as following a strict moral code of hospitality and generosity towards strangers.† Some are even depicted as Robin Hood-like figures, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor.‡

Yet another theory for the origins of *futuwwa* suggests rather that the concept does not predate Islam at all, but rather emerged from bands of volunteer warriors for the faith from the first generations of Islamic conquest. Such bands, referred to as *mutatawwiya* [¨volunteers¨], were known as much for their disdain for all earthly authority as for their religious zeal.§

For our purposes we don't need to decide between these competing theories. In fact they might not be that conflicting at all – there is plenty of evidence to suggest that all of these groups formed part of a joint social scene on the margins of Islamic society - some former Persian warriors had joined the bands of the *mutatawwiya*, and similarly, both groups probably had a significant degree of interaction with the Bedouin-brigands of the *sa'alik* type. What's important for our purposes is that all of these different social groups arrived, along very different paths, towards a similar set of conditions – namely, the pursuit of mercenary work and brigandry, a fierce commitment to political independence, and a spirit of social egalitarianism. It was from these conditions that the concept of *futuwwa* first emerged.

* This theory was most fully articulated in Zakeri 1995.

† Ridgeon 2010 pp. 7-8.

‡ One paradigmatic example is the pre-Islamic poet Hatim Ta'i, who served as a role model of *futuwwa* for centuries after his death.

§ Tor 2007.

The earliest records we have of the use of the term *futuwwa* suggest that it still carried some relation to an elite warrior class, giving credence to the Persian nobility origins theory. The notable Umayyad-era Persian poet Bashar bin Burd uses the term extensively in many of his works, in a manner which clearly indicates that he sees the quality as related to a noble family background:

> O you, who ask about me so heatedly, to know me;
> I am the tip of the nobles.
> It grew under the Banu 'Amir, the nobles, my branch,
> but my roots are the Quraysh of the Persians.
> And I fill the place of the *fata*.*

Around a century later, in 251/865,† when the 'Abassid army laid siege to Baghdad, a poem celebrating the bravery of the '*ayyar* who remained to defend the city describes these warriors as

> a multitude in coats of mail made of cotton
> who enter the war like piercing lions.
> They bear helmets of palm-leaves adorned with ovule,
> and shields of reed mats. They do not know what flight is, even when the braves, fearing death, flee [the battle-field].
> One of them, naked and without overcoat, attacks two thousand.
> The young man, as he thrusts his stab, says:
> 'Take it from *al-fata al- 'ayyar*...¨‡

While both descriptions emphasize bravery and military skill, the second is clearly emphasizing the relative poverty of these warriors, clad only in ¨coats of mail made of cotton¨ and ¨helmets of palms-leaves.¨ This suggests that either those identified with *futuwwa* lost their social standing over time, or that the term was co-opted by lower-class fighters.

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* Zakeri 1995 p. 304.
† All subsequent dates will be given in this format – Hijri / Gregorian.
‡ Zakery 1995 p. 285.

'Ayyar - Noble Brigands and Revolutionaries

Whatever the historical origin of *futuwwa* was, the immediate context from which it emerged is clear – bands of mercenaries known as '*ayyar*. Starting from late Umayyad period, we find such bands roaming Muslim lands, sometimes employed as fighters in the numerous struggles between competing ruling dynasties and religious movements, sometimes operating as simple highway robbers, and sometimes supplying the fighting forces for outright revolutionary movements. Abu Mansur Al-Azhari (d. 370/980), one of the earliest Arabic language grammarians, quoted a definition of the term ¨'*ayyar*¨ from Ibn 'Abbas (d. 68/687):

> He said: The Arabs use the term ʿ*ayyar* both to praise and to blame. It is said: So and so is an ʿ*ayyar*: he is energetic in acts of disobedience [enthusiastic in rebellions]; and an ʿ*ayyar* youth: energetic in the obedience of Allah.*

The '*ayyar* were hardly the only mercenary forces to operate in the region during this period. What set the '*ayyar* apart, however, was their adherence to a strict moral code, which was referred to in Arabic by the name *futuwwa* (*jawanmardi* in Persian). This moral code incurred the admiration of certain witnesses, but even more remarkably, it was sometimes reluctantly acknowledged by their harshest critics. Thus, in the 12th century, the Baghdadi scholar al-Jawzi wrote of them:

> Amongst those persons who have been made captive by the misrepresentations of Satan are the '*ayyar*; and this body, who are called *fityan*, take the people's goods, and say 'a *fata*, is one who does not commit fornication nor lie, and strives to preserve the honour and reputation of women, and does not violate their privacy.' In spite of this, they do not restrain themselves from seizing people's property, not remembering that by their action they oppress the people. They call this organisation '*futuwwat*.'†

Certainly not all those who called themselves '*ayyar* or *fityan* followed this moral code to the same degree, and there in the historical record many examples of groups and individuals who claimed the title while displaying behavior contrary to its teachings. But apparently enough of them adhered to it enough of the time for it to be remarked upon even by those authors who, like al-Jawzi, considered them a source of political instability and criminality.

The flourishing of the '*ayyar* phenomenon corresponded geographically and historically with areas in which the early Islamic states were at their weakest points. One such time and place was Nishapur, the capital of Khorasan (now in North-Eastern Iran) in the 10th and 11th centuries. One contemporary historian tells us that with the waning of the caliphal power of the 'Abassids:

> Many *ru'asa* [leaders] appeared among [the people of Nishapur], so that a number of *ru'asa* of the *'ayyars* developed in each quarter, protecting their quarter, collecting money from its inhabitants, and warring against those who were in neighbor.‡

This historian clearly depicts the '*ayyar* as operating almost as criminal gangs, collecting protection money and fighting among themselves for control of territory. But the same historian also depicts the limits of '*ayyar* local power in the face of local public pressure – to a much larger extent than that of the centralized states:

> When, in 423/1043, one of the *'ayyars* entered the house of a cloth merchant in Baghdad and took his money, 'the people of his market were strongly partisan on his behalf.' As a result, the *'ayyars* returned part of what had been taken.§

Such accounts suggest that the urban '*ayyar* were a sort of popular militias, emerging to fill the gap whenever the organized apparatus of violence of dynastic states was weak or absent. It's therefore all the more remarkable how

* Tor 2007 p. 27.
† Ridgeon 2010 p. 12.
‡ Mottahedeh 1980 p. 161
§ Mottahedeh 1980 p. 117.

consistent accounts of them depict them as heroic figures adhering to a strict moral code surpassing that of almost any contemporary ruler.

> The *'ayyaran* riots in Baghdad between the years 422/1031 and 426/1035 led by Abu 'Ali Burjumi - feared so much by the town's inhabitants that they hardly dared to refer to him by any other epithet but *qa'id* (= boss, chief) - were directly connected to the *futuwwa* movement as well, one proof of which is Burjumi's own overt chivalry: he was known never to bother women or to seize their property. The political ascendancy of these bandit knights was often quite highly profiled as well. One hears, for example, of an incident where a huge mob of people gathered in a demonstration at the Rusafa mosque in Baghdad, forcing the preacher, Abu'l-Husayn ibn al-Ghariq to stop his sermon [*khutba*], threatening him that he should only use the name of Burjumi in the *khutba*, rather than that of caliph or king![*]

The odd transition from claiming that the nickname ¨*qa'id*¨ was illustrative of the public fear from Burjumi to describing his immense popularity – to the extent that the people of the city rioted in the mosque to demand his honor – is typical of many of the historical sources on the '*ayyar*. Even modern historians have struggled to explain what to their statist eyes seems like a contradiction in the nature of the *'ayyar* phenomenon as *both* criminals *and* exemplars of virtue. Those familiar with the later histories of armed insurgency, however, will easily recognize this as characteristic of militant movements which depend more on the support of the local population than do standing armies of centralized states.

The *futuwwa* code of behavior was an extension of this dynamic. The '*ayyar* had to position themselves as protectors of women, the poor, and the marginal classes against the predations of conquering armies and the ruling classes. Such mutual dependency between the '*ayyar/fityan* and the neighborhood and communities in which they were based determined much of the moral code they developed for themselves.

This sometimes meant operating essentially as Robin Hood-like figures, stealing from the wealthy in order to distribute the loot among the general public. Thus we hear of another '*ayyar* operating in the 12th century Sistan (on the Iranian-Afghan border) by the name of Jamal al-Luk, who had

> under him a large band of Arab and Persian horsemen, with whom he engaged in robbery. He would build hospices and supply food to wayfarers with the money that he robbed from people, and he is said to have claimed that he never employed violence except against those who did not give tithes on their property in alms.[†]

Such a commitment to social justice and redistribution of wealth was, however, only a small part of *futuwwa*. At its fullest expression, *futuwwa* was an all-encompassing moral order, which shaped every aspect of life on both an individual and a collective level.

> And I heard ʿAbd al-Raḥmān saying: 'It reached me that when Abū Ḥafṣ wished to leave Baghdad, the shaykhs and the *fityan* who were in [Baghdad] saw him off, and when they wished to return, one of them said to him: ‘Show us the way to *futuwwa*. What is it?’ He replied: ‘*Futuwwa* is perceived in respect to usage and behaviour, not speech. ’ And they were amazed by his words.
> He said: 'Abū Ḥafṣ was asked: ‘Does the *fata* have any distinguishing sign?’ He replied: ‘Yes! Whoever sees the *fityan*, and is not ashamed in front of them by his character and his deeds, is a *fata*.'[‡]

* Mahjub, in: Lewinsohn 1999 p. 574.

† Ibn Battuta, vol. II, p. 405, quoted in Ridgeon 2011 p. 20 n. 48.

‡ Tor 2007 pp. 194-195.

Much of what we know of the early '*ayyar* comes from heroic folk tales and poetry which has been preserved from the period. Thus, in a 12th century Persian rendition of the epic folk poem *Kalila wa Dimna*, a very long paragraph is devoted to expounding the concept of *futuwwa*:

> The crown jewel of the body is virtue (*muruwwat*), and virtue is a sign of *futuwwa*. F*utuwwa* causes no ill-feelings.. F*utuwwa* is the labor of the liberated and free in spirit, the pearl of great price. F*utuwwa* makes renowned the name of men. Consider nothing to be higher or nobler than F*utuwwa*. F*utuwwa* is not apart from Justice. F*utuwwa* makes glad the heart of wise men. F*utuwwa* is the key to righteousness; it broadcasts one's good name abroad...*

This goes on for a while, but you get the point. In a popular work of oral literature like *Kalila wa Dimna*, *futuwwa* simply *is* the definition of virtue.

An even more important example is the story of ¨Samak the *'Ayyar*,¨ an extremely popular epic which probably originates from the first centuries of Muslim rule in Iran, if not earlier. The story recounts the romantic pursuit of a noble brigand named Samak after Mah-pari, a princess of China. The version recorded in the 12th century introduces the '*ayyar* by explaining that ¨Although the *´ayyars* had no official standing, all citizens [of the city of Halab] knew that they could turn to them for protection in case of injustice¨. Later Samak himself proclaims

> Even if we be renowned as mercenaries (*'ayyar-pisha*) we are in fact chevaliers (*jawanmardan*), for one cannot be a mercenary without being also a chevalier.†

And when Samak´s adoptive father, a son of the king of Persia, is asked by a guest to explain ¨the principles of the '*ayyars*,¨ he responds:

> There is no limit to being an *'ayyar*, but there are seventy-two principles that every *'ayyar* knows. I will tell you the two most important: To keep secrets, and to help those in need.‡

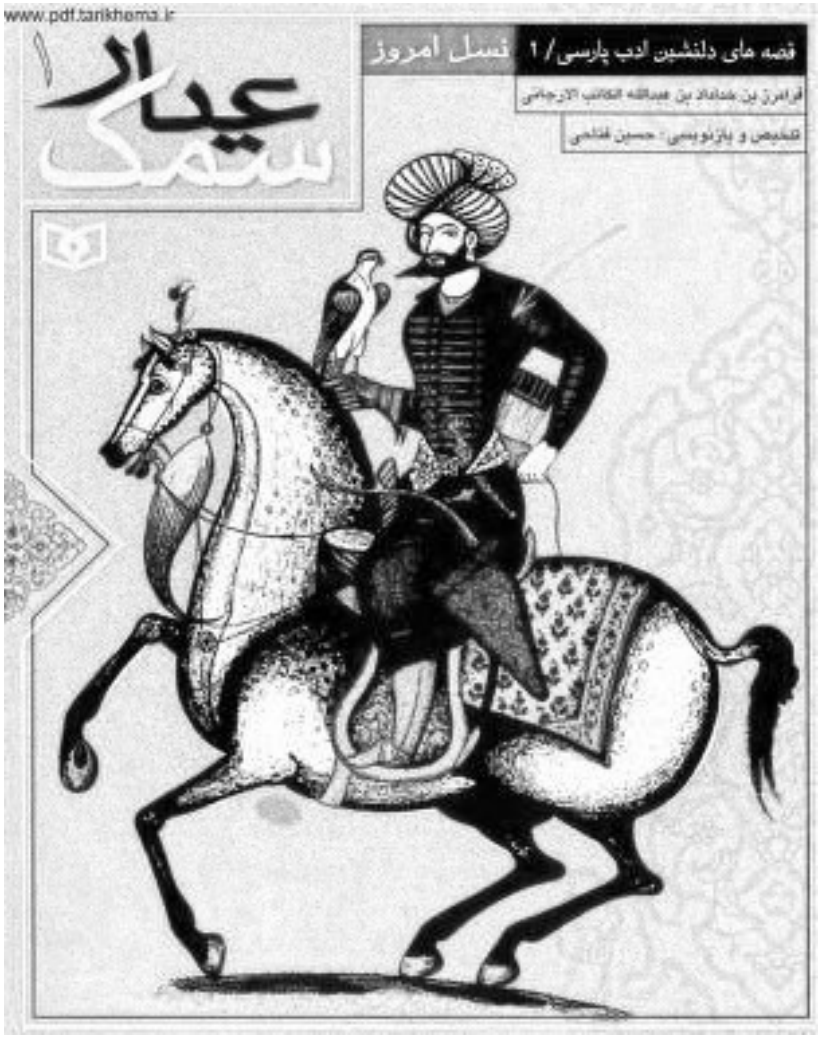
The story of Samak the ´Ayyar is also remarkable for the ample attention it provides to women as both *'ayyar* and *fityan*. At one point, for instance, it tells of an *'ayyar* named Kanun who

> had a young daughter whose name was Ruzafzun. Along with her brothers, Behzad and Razmyar, she had been trained since childhood in combat and the tricks and techniques of the *'ayyars*. By the time she was twelve, she was so fearless and clever in *'ayyari* that her father began to fear for her life. He forbade her to pursue *'ayyari* any further. She tried every way she could to get around him, but all paths were blocked. She could not join the *'ayyars* of Machin, for no one dared defy Kanun.

The story then goes on to describe Ruzafzun defying her father´s orders to free Samak from captivity and to continue her training with the *'ayyar*. In another part of the story,

> Samak takes the prince to visit a female musician by the name of Rūḥ-afzā, so that she can arrange a meeting between the prince and his lover. 'Finding an appropriate moment to address the lady, Samak stood up and made obeisance. Then he said, "O mother, do you know what chivalry (*jawanmardi*) is and whose profession it truly is?" Rūḥ-afzā remarked, "Chivalry is, of course, the accomplishment of 'men' of chivalry, but if a woman acts with chivalrously, then she is a 'man' in its practice as well." So Samak asked, "Of the arts of chivalry which do you possess?" Rūḥ-afzā replied, "In chivalry I possess complete trustworthiness. If anyone asks for my help in some affair, I will do all I can for him or her, putting my life at stake for their sake, considering the accomplishment of their work as my mortal obligation. And if someone comes to me earnestly seeking refuge, I will protect him or her to my last breath. I will never divulge the secret of anyone who confides in me. This is what I understand of 'manliness' and chivalry (*mardī u jawānmardī*).§

* Mahjub, in: Lewinsohn 1999 p. 556.
† Mahjub, in: Lewinsohn 1999 p. 563.
‡ Rassouli and Mechner 2021 p. 24.
§ Mahjub, in: Lewinsohn 1999 p. 562.



The Urban *Fityan*

In parallel to the fighting activities of the *'ayyar*, a new social form emerged in several of the major Islamic urban centers – I'll let one of the contemporaries, from the 11th century history of al-Bayhaqi, describe it:

> A group of *fityan* . . . had severed all family relations and taken up abode in a house on one of the popular streets of the city [Baghdad]. They lived there as bachelors, enjoying each other's company in the pleasure of comfortable living, inviting musicians and dancers, drinking wine, eating copiously, putting on fine clothes, and leading a life of moral and sexual indulgence; at other times they would engage in discussions or sit in the upper room and watch the passers by.*

This is one of many accounts that describe such groups of young men pursuing a lifestyle of communal living, hedonistic cultural pursuits, music, fine food, and lavish parties. The exact relationship between these *fityan* and the *ayyar* is unclear. Some accounts suggest that the *fityan* were themselves *'ayyar*. Others imply that they only sought to imitate the *'ayyar* – with varying degrees of success. Probably both were true for some of these groups and not for others.

What's clear is that the *fityan* adopted not only the name of *'ayyar* but also a large part of their moral code. Like the *'ayyar*, the *fityan* spent some of their time training in martial arts. They also placed a great emphasis on values such as generous hospitality, social egalitarianism and the defense of women's bodily autonomy. Furthermore, the activities in the *fityan* houses were not limited to hedonistic parties. Other accounts also describe them as devoting some of their time to intellectual pursuits. Thus, we hear of Abu al-Fatak 'Abd Allah Daylami, who was nicknamed the ¨*Qadi* [-Judge] of the *Fityan*,¨ ¨holding assemblies of *fityan* in his house during which he would preach to them the principles of chivalry, which they would note down.¨†

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* Ridgeon 2010 p. 10.

† Mahjub, in: Lewinsohn 1999 p. 565.

One of the richest sources for the cultural life of the urban *fityan* is the monumental 10th century collection of poems, biographical sketches, and anecdotes by abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani titled *kitab al-aghani* [the Book of Songs]. The book describes the lively social scene in Baghdad at the time, with *'ayyar* and *fityan* holding banquets and social gatherings alongside a host of musicians, poets, dancers, sex workers, and other members of the local night life.

> We read of 'Ali ibn Jahm (d. 249/863), for instance, a poet who frequented the company of the followers of *futuwwa* in Baghdad, in whose honour a party was held in the house of some of the local *fityan* to celebrate his being freed from prison and return from exile. During this celebration he composed a famous poem in which he describes the *fityan*'s rituals in detail, mentioning their 'Houses of Conviviality' (*tarab-khana*), their organizational hierarchy, as well as the beautiful women and handsome adolescent boys to be found in their assemblies.*

There is also evidence in the *kitab al-Aghani* about the cultural influences on the *fityan*, as in the biography of renowned Persian singer, musician and poet Ibrahim al-Mawsili (742-804):

> As a youth, Ibrahim had joined a group of marauding Arab desperados (*su'alik*) and learned from them to sing and dance, qualities which made him popular in the circle of the *fityan*. Later he had to flee to Mosul to stay away from the ceaseless demands of his friends. When after a year of residence in Mosul he returned to Kufa, his comrades welcomed him by giving him the nickname al-fata al-Mawsili.†

Recall that the *su'alik* have also been proposed as one of the historical precedents for the development of the *'ayyar*. Al-Mawsili's biography shows that cultural exchange between rural brigands, urban mercenaries, and the artistic milieu continued to shape all three.

* Mahjub, in: Lewinsohn 1999 p. 565-565.
† Zakeri 1995 p. 307.

Ribats – Outposts of *Futuwwa*

Futuwwa was not to be found only cities. Another institution which probably played a pivotal role in its shaping was the *ribats*. These were originally military outposts constructed along the borders of the Muslim caliphate, and used both as defensive structures and as headquarters from which to mount offensive assaults on the Islamic states' neighbors – Byzantines, Sasanids, Visigoths and others. Such outposts were manned by mercenaries or religiously-driven volunteer forces – that is, precisely the kind of groups that formed the backbone of *'ayyar* bands. The warriors stationed at these outposts developed their distinct way of life, which included a deep asceticism, seclusion from worldly affairs, and communalism.*

Over time, the military significance of the *ribats* decreased, and the nature of the communities inhabiting them changed accordingly. They began to draw visitors – travelers, religious ascetics, and those fleeing the authorities. They became renowned for their generous hospitality and for providing shelter to political dissidents of every kind. In several cases the *ribats* themselves became headquarters of revolutionary movements, and in the case of the Maghreb in the 16th century for example, of anti-colonial guerrilla resistance.†

The connection between the warriors in the *ribats* and the urban *'ayyar* and *fityan* may not be obvious at first glance. While the former were religiously-motivated ascetics, the latter were hedonistic urban militants. Yet the two shared some common characteristics. Both were engaged with hospitality, which sometimes translated into holding large banquets for their guests. Both practiced a communal way of life. And perhaps most importantly, both developed a strong and highly consequential bond with another group of dissidents emerging in the area at the time - the heterogeneous movement of mystics and intellectuals collectively known as at the *sufis*. It was through this encounter in particular that the joint ethic of *futuwwa* came to encompass both the urban fraternities and the rural outposts together in a single coherent movement.

* Hofer, in: Papas 2020.
† Hofer, in: Papas 2020, p. 178.

Between Sufis and *Fityan*

Sufism is a highly complex historical phenomenon with many different variations and relationships with political power and the state.‡ What's important for us, though, is that many *sufis* found the lifestyles and moral codes of the *'ayyar* and *fityan* to be so admirable that they incorporated it into their own ethical worldview. From that point on, *futuwwa* came to have a deep philosophical connection to sufism, to the degree that the two were hardly separable. As a result, the most extensive collection of documents we have on the medieval *futuwwa* comes from sufi authors, who composed a library's worth of guides and manuals on *futuwwa* morality and praxis. Before we examine these, however, a word of caution is in order.

As mentioned, sufis were a highly diverse group, and diverged among themselves on many points – including on their relationship with state authorities. Those most closely associated with the *fityan* tended to be precisely those who held deeply anti-authoritarian and even antinomian (that is, hostile towards religious law and social etiquette) attitudes. Among those were, for example, the *Malamatis* and the *Qalandaris*, who can only properly be described as a medieval version of punks. They are described in contemporary sources as shaving off all the hair on their bodies, going about in public naked or with ragged clothes, piercing their skins to wear large metal rings, and openly flaunting many religious prohibitions.§

Such anti-authoritarian sufis, however, were usually not the ones to compose the works on *futuwwa* that have been preserved for centuries. Those almost always were written by the more ¨sombre¨ and politically conservative of the sufi. More than a few in fact represent parts of attempts to co-opt the popularity of *futuwwa* into legitimating projects for Islamic states.** As a result, the version of *futuwwa* we get from these writings, while certainly not completely divorced from historical reality (the *fityan* were a highly visible institution in many cities, so outright lies about them would probably not carry much weight), nonetheless might represent the moral order of state authorities

‡ The most anti-statist aspects of *sufism* have recently been described in Prado 2010.
§ Ridgeon, in: Chiabotti et al 2016 pp. 390-392.
** See final section on ¨*Futuwwa* and the state.¨

rather than of the *fityan* themselves. So before going on the describe the moral code preserved in the sufi-*futuwwa* manuals, let's explore a bit more of the sufi-*futuwwa* relationship itself.

> Once an ʿ*ayyār* said to a Sufi: 'The difference between us and you is this: That we do everything that we say we will do, whereas all that you meditate, and that comes to pass in your heart, you do.'*

There is an endless stream of sufi writings, from the very early days of sufism in the first two centuries of Islam to its period of flourishing in the 11th and 12th century, that testifies to the fact that the early sufis admired the *'ayyar* and the *fityan* and considered them a high authority on issues like morality and proper social behaviour. A particularly revealing story from al-Hujwiri (d. 464/1072) describes a meeting in Nishapur between the 9th century *malamati* sufi Ahmad bin 'Ammara al-Qassar and an *'ayyar* ¨famous for his *futuwwa*¨ named Nuh, ¨who was the captain of all the *'ayyars* of Nishapur¨:

> I said to him: 'Oh Nuh, what is *futuwwa*?' He asked: 'My *futuwwa* or you *futuwwa*?' 'Describe both,' I said. He said: 'My *futuwwa* is that I put off the coat (*qaba'*) and wear a patched frock and practice the conduct appropriate to that garment, in order that I may become a sufi and refrain from sin because of the shame that I feel before God; but you put off the patched frock in order that you may not be deceived by men, and that men may not be deceived by you; accordingly, my *futuwwa* is formal observance of the religious law, whereas your *futuwwa* is spiritual observance of the truth.'†

The story is remarkable for several reasons. First, it depicts al-Qassar as seeking guidance on *futuwwa* from an *'ayyar*. Second, it suggests a kind of Division of labor between *'ayyar* and sufis when it comes to *futuwwa*. The former are meant to embody a social ideal to be recognized and emulated by their peers, while the latter (and this was especially a version of sufism identified with the *malamatis*) were called to shun public approval and even actively seek humiliation and social ostracism. As ibn 'Atta was quoted in saying,

> Violating the rules of proper behaviour amidst its upholders is itself [a sign] of proper behaviour.‡

In direct contrast to this, the early sufis describe the *fityan* as the most perfect embodiment of proper social etiquette. The earliest guidebooks they produced on *futuwwa* reflect this, largely being devoted to accounts of the virtuous deeds of the *futuwwa*, and apparently meant for consumption not by the *fityan* themselves but by those seeking to emulate them. The very first such book, al-Sulami's *kitab al-futuwwa* [¨the Book of Futuwwa¨], is such a book. It is composed almost entirely of anecdotes from the life of real or legendary *fityan* to illustrate the virtues they embodied, while saying almost nothing about their actual structure or way of life.

A specific case of sufis learning from *fityan* and emulating them might be the sufi *khanqah* – a rural communal living and gathering space, which seems to have been a sufi version of the *ribat* or the urban lodges of the *'ayyar* and *fityan*. According to Ridgeon,

> The *khanqah* (probably inspired by the example of the *Karrāmiyya*) gave the Sufis space to practice their own ritual activities and host not only fully committed individuals but also a large number of 'lay-affiliates.' This would have included the equivalent of a “soup-kitchen” for the needy and a safe place to stay for travelers. One of the best examples of this is the *khanqah* of Abū Saʿīd b. Abī l-Khayr (d. 427/1049) where 'ordinary people, poor folk and laborers, urban and rural [and] even the most ostracized outcasts of society, such as a wretched young drunkard in one instance' received hospitality.§

Ridgeon does not mention the *ribat* as a source of inspiration for the *khanqa*, but the description of the institution, the attribution to the K*aramiyya*, and the

* Tor 2007 p. 233
† Zakeri 1995 pp. 4-5.
‡ Ridgeon, in: Chiabotti et al p. 379.
§ Ridgeon, in: Chiabotti et al p. 386-387.

specific mention of a ¨wretched young drunkard¨ are all suggestive of such a connection.

At the same time, the fact that this ¨young drunkard¨ is a mere guest in the sufi institution – and not vice versa – is also indicative of a larger shift in the nature of the sufi-*fityan* relationship. If the early sufis are depicted as learning from the *'ayyar* the rules of *futuwwa*, by the time that sufis become a more established and legitimate movement, the roles are reversed, and the sufis increasingly take on the role of educating the *fityan*. Indeed in the process of institutionalization and centralization that some (though never all) sufis underwent, they increasingly came to position *futuwwa* as a kind of ¨sufism for the masses,¨ less demanding in its requirements and more accessible to those who had to work for a living.

This meant that sufis sometimes ended up scolding the actually existing *fityan* for failing to uphold what the sufis perceived as the true ideals of *futuwwa*. Thus, in a meeting between al-Mursi – one of the leaders of 13th century institutionalized sufism – and a member of a *futuwwa* club in Cairo,

> Al-Mursī urged the young man to destroy his own idols and thereby become a true youth, just like Abraham: ´When you destroy them, you will be a *fata*. The five idols are the self, passion, Satan, desire and the world. Understand this: *Futuwwa* is not in water and salt, but rather *futuwwa* is faith and guidance.´*

The mention of ¨water and salt¨ is an obvious reference to the *futuwwa* initiation ceremony. Al-Mursi, and the class of sufis of which he was part, thus trying to enforce a more sombre and devout version of *futuwwa* against the practices of the *fityan*.

There is a clear class dimension to all this. If the *fityan* represented a kind of popular and egalitarian way of life, the statist sufis' attempt to subsume it under their authority represented part of the efforts to co-opt the institution and place it under central control. As 'Umar al-Suhrawardi, one of the leading figures of this trend, once remarked,

> The lodge of *futuwwa* is built with the income from the spiritual masters, whereas the *khanqahs* of the Sufis are built with the income from kings and princes.†

This is important to keep in mind when we go on to explore the writings of the sufis on *futuwwa*. These writings are an invaluable source for the development of *futuwwa*, but they should not be taken at face value. They represent a version of *futuwwa* specifically packaged to appeal to the state and the political class.

* Hofer 2015 p. 164.

† Ridgeon, in: Chiabotti et al 2016 pp. 389.

One illustration of the sufi-*'ayyar* exchange in the earliest records is the biography of Fudayl ibn Iyad (d. 187/803), a leading sufi scholar and ascetic in Khorasan. Ibn Iyad began his career as a brigand who was ¨among the great shaykhs, an *'ayyar* of the Way [*ʿayyār-i ṭarīqat*], celebrated among his peers, and a refuge of the people."* His sufi biographies often describe him as having repented for his criminal pursuits and subsequently dedicated his life to reimbursing his victims and the study of *hadith*. However, those same authors also make it clear that he was already known for his virtuous moral character even before this repentance.

> Indeed, the most fantastic of these later tales of his early life portray Fuḍayl as a highway robber-ascetic, sitting in a tent in the middle of the desert with a band of cutthroats, wearing sackcloth and prayer beads, until the tale reverts to the story of his falling in love and being struck to the heart by a Quranic verse.†

The combination of his *'ayyari* past and his religious piety was probably why he was often celebrated by the sufis as the quintessential fata. He is often referred to in sufi writings as the ¨*shaykh of the fityan*.¨

* Tor, in: Sadeghi et al 2014, p. 207 n. 55.

† Tor, in: Sadeghi et al 2014, p. 208.

Futuwwa Virtues

The sufi writings on *futuwwa* document in great detail the moral worldview associated with the term. And although most of these writings reflect an attempt to construct a state-friendly and politically nonthreatening version of *futuwwa* virtues, it's undeniable that they did in fact record a real historical phenomenon that was upheld by actually existing *fityan* – and not only those co-opted into the apparatus of the state. Let's discuss some of these virtues in turn. I will mention whenever the historical accounts of actually existing *fityan* seem to diverge from the ideal expounded in the sufi texts.

* * *

> Were I ambitious to behold
> Increasing stores of treasured gold,
> Each tribe that roves the desert knows
> I might be wealthy, if I chose.
> But other joys can gold impart;
> Far other wishes warm my heart;—
> Ne'er may I strive to swell the heap
> Till want and woe have ceased to weep.‡

One of the virtues most strongly associated with *futuwwa* throughout its many centuries of existence is that of **generosity**. Folk tales, poems and sufi manuals all argue that the highest form of *futuwwa* is to share one's resources with both friends and strangers. The *fata* is specifically and repeatedly encouraged to avoid considering his generosity as an excuse for pride – he is expected to give away his possessions with gratitude and humility. Al-Junayd (d. 298/910) wrote of his encounter with the *futuwwa*-inclined sufi abu Hafs:

> Abū Ḥafṣ stayed with me for a year with eight [others]. I would feed them good food' – and he mentioned some items of clothes – 'and when they wanted to journey forth I clothed them. Abu Hafs said to me: 'If

‡ Hatim al-Ta'i, in: Ridgeon 2011 p. 163 (see above n. 1).

you come to Nīshāpūr we shall teach you generosity and chivalry. ' Then he said: 'Your deed had in it reluctance, when the poor ones arrived – be with them without reluctance; when you were hungry, they were hungry, and when you were sated, they were sated.*

The virtue of generosity is a clear part of what the *fityan* inherited from the Arab pre-Islamic cultural heritage, in which hospitality and generosity towards guests was a highly prized quality of character. The *fityan*, who also practiced hospitality, and whose houses were known for holding their doors open to visitors of all sorts, adopted this virtue enthusiastically. Many historical accounts describe the lavish treatment they received as guests of the *fityan*,† and the sufi manuals are full of minute details on proper table etiquette for hosting guests in the communal houses of *fityan*.

* * *

"*Futuwwa* is that the resident and the foreigner are equivalent in your eyes."‡

The virtue of **humility** – of avoiding arrogance, and seeing oneself as equal to any other – was another remarkably consistent element of the *futuwwa* ethos. Much like the virtue of generosity, this also had some clear social-egalitarian dimensions – the *fitwan* were said to make no distinction based on class or ethnic background, and to everyone, from kings to beggars, with the same respect.

Al-Qushayri: '*Futuwwa* is that you do not see yourself as more preferable than another.' He further expanded upon his definition by claiming: '[*Futuwwa*] is that you do not discriminate in regard to the one with whom you eat, whether he be a saint or an unbeliever.'§

The question of who can be a *fata* is actually one the topics on which the sufi *futuwwa* manuals diverge most dramatically from the historical accounts. The sufis often stated that the ranks of the *fityan* should be open only to a very specific class, and explicitly banned a whole host of categories from membership – women,** religious minorities, the disabled, homosexuals and ¨hermaphrodites,¨†† and even certain professions.

Yet critics of actually existing *futuwwa* groups often ¨accused¨ them of accepting into their ranks precisely those groups. Indeed it appears that at least some of the *fityan* here practiced what they preached *against* the authority of the state-sponsored sufis and their very clear instructions.‡‡

* * *

As far as the ethics of *futuwwa* were concerned, **fraternity** - the bond between two or more adherents of *futuwwa* - was by far the most important pursuit in a person's life. Long portions of *futuwwa* manuals were dedicated to rules on how to maintain a solid friendship.

Futuwwat is considering other people's actions with tolerance while regarding your own with dissatisfaction; respecting the rights of those who are superior, inferior or equal to you; and adhering to your friends despite their mistakes and wrongdoings because when you love someone, his cruelty should incite your loyalty. The beloved's turning away from you should lead you to him. Anger either felt or expressed should have no part in loving friendship; otherwise love is lacking, and the relationship depends only on interest.§§

There is not doubt that the *fityan* did have a strong sense of group cohesion. They are often found in the sources acting to protect their members from harm, injustice or persecution. There are also numerous occasions in which different groups of *'ayyar* and *fityan* are depicted as getting into violent clashes amongst themselves – in clear violation of the sufi principle of universal fraternity

* Tor 2007 p. 194.
† See next section, ¨Global Spread.¨
‡ Tor 2007 p. 242.
§ Casewit 2017 p. 67.

** See section on ¨the Gender of Futuwwa.¨
†† See section on ¨Chastity.¨
‡‡ On Christians and Jews taking part in *futuwwa* see Irwin 2004 and Dadoyan 2003.
§§ Al-Sulami, quoted in Ridgeon 2011 p. 16 n. 4.

among all *fityan*. It seems that while the sufis were urging the *fityan* to view themselves as part of a larger collective and a common cause, in practice, the bonds of fraternity were much stronger for each local *futuwwa* band than across the movement as a whole.

One implication of the virtue of fraternity in *futuwwa* was the practice of communal life. *Fityan* were also depicted as sharing their resources with their comrades to an even larger extent as they did with guests or strangers. All *fityan* were expected to place their income (and in the case of *'ayyar* brigands, booty) in a collective treasury. This treasury would then fund the expenses of the group as a whole, as well as the lavish parties they would hold for themselves and their many guests.* Many of their rules for proper table manners were in fact meant to ensure that all those present got an equal share of the meal.†

* * *

[skip this subsection to avoid discussion of sexual violence and rape]

Depictions of the sexual practices of the *fityan* is another one of those topics in which the gap between the idealized versions of the institutional sufis and the historical accounts diverge most dramatically. The sufis tended to urge *fityan* to practice **chastity**, and to claim that a true *fata* engages in no extramarital sexual activity whatsoever; contemporary witnesses, however, described a very different scene, and ones that were critical of *futuwwa* even described them as engaged in constant orgiastic debauchery.

Yet what both have in common, as I've already alluded to, is the claim that the *fityan* studiously avoided assaulting women. This aspect is so consistent across different accounts, and so distinct from other groups engaged in collective violence at the time, that it bears emphasizing. Here is one illustration – from the biography of an 11th century *'ayyar* in Baghdad:

> A certain beggar by the name of Aswad al-Zabid, known for his destitution, seeing others once poorer than himself now in positions of power, also armed himself and soon became a very successful gangster, accomplished in the high arts of murder, arson, and robbery. Despite his demonic temperament and conduct, he was quite handsome in appearance, and was quite notorious for his love affairs, womanizing and a long train of admirers…
> One day he purchased a slave-girl in the town Mosul for a thousand dinars. When at night he tried to satisfy his lust with the girl, she rejected him. When he asked for her reasons, she rebuked him for his misconduct and public ill-fame, saying that he repelled her. 'So what should I do with you?' said the warlord. 'Resell me.' she replied. 'Would you rather that I free you and give you a thousand dinars as dowry?' asked Aswad. 'So much the better,' she said. So he took the girl to the local magistrate's court of Qaqi Ibn al-Daqqaq near the Ibn Raqban Mosque, manumitting her with a thousand dinars...This became the talk of Baghdad, so that all marvelled at his *futuwwa*.‡

This story is all the more remarkable because, under the social mores of the time, al-Zabid was ¨entitled¨ to sexually exploit the enslaved girl. His respect for her bodily autonomy – specifically described as indicative of his *futuwwa* – was therefore above and beyond what was expected of him from his contemporaries. Thus we find in *futuwwa* a powerful tool for enforcing a high standard of consent on young men, and by extension, on society writ large.

One place where supporters and critics diverged was in the depiction of homosexual activity among the *fityan*. The critics sometimes claimed that homosexuality was widepsread in the *futuwwa* fraternities.

> The account given of these groups of so-called *fityan* in the third/ninth century by Abū Ḥayyān al-Ṭawḥīdī (d. after 400/1009) reproves them for their complete immorality and decadence; no sin or perversion did they abstain from, even homosexuality, he relates. Once someone asked a judge who adhered to the *futuwwa* practice, Abū Ḥayyān notes, to give

* Ahmad 2017 pp. 90-91.
† Dadoyan 2003 p. 150.
‡ Mahjub, in: Lewinsohn 1999 p. 572.

his legal opinion of homosexuality: should it be classed in the same category of offenses as adultery? The ‘chivalric’ judge then gave his opinion that homosexuality was far less sinful than adultery and he reproached his questioner for placing the two in the same category.*

The *Kitab al-Aghani* and other popular works of literature also include numerous non-judgmental depictions of both male and female homosexuality, which, though not directly tied to the *fityan*, nonetheless show the attitude of their direct social milieu towards it.†

Most sufi exponents of *futuwwa*, meanwhile, simply avoided the subject, while a few of the more state-affiliated ones specifically instructed the *fityan* to shun homosexuals and ¨hermaphrodites¨ from their ranks.‡ As is the case with extramarital sex more broadly, here as well we can speculate that such instructions were not upheld by all bands of *fityan* all of the time, though the extent to which they did hold sway is impossible to determine.

An additional accusation aimed at the *fityan* by some critics was that they were accepting, and even encouraging, of pederasty (sexual exploitation of adolescent boys by older men). Here the evidence is even more flimsy – none of those leveling the accusation claimed to witness any such thing themselves. Instead they only pointed at circumstantial evidence, like the ceremony of dressing the novice in the ritualistic pants [*sarawil*] and girdle, which they found to be sexually suggestive.

It's important to note that pederasty was in fact quite normalized among the political elite at the time, with many celebrated poets, for example, writing erotic descriptions of the charms of young male cup-bearers and servant-boys.§ So when elite critics of *futuwwa* accused them of practicing pederasty, it's at least possible that they were projecting from their own experiences. At the same time, it should be noted that the novice-master relationship depicted by the sufi-*futuwwa*, which they emphasized demanded complete subordination, while not directly indicative of sexual exploitation, does suggest that there were little to no mechanisms to protect *fityan* from it.** Indeed other aspects of the *futuwwa* ethos – like loyalty to group cohesion and the emphasis on forgiving the misdeeds of your brethren – also seem to go against mechanisms of accountability that might prevent sexual violence within the ranks of the *fityan*.

* * *

Basically every depiction of a virtuous *futuwwa* places a huge emphasis on their commitment to **veracity** – meaning to always speak the truth, whatever the consequences. This is especially true of the earlier version of *futuwwa* more closely associated with mercenary and paramilitary activity. This can be demonstrated with a morality tale about a group of *'ayyars* who were asked ¨were asked about a situation wherein a man ran past an *'ayyar* and a little later another man with a sword, obviously intending to kill the first man, ran up to the *'ayyar* and asked him if someone had just passed by.¨ One of the *'ayyars* responds the ¨the *'ayyar* should get up from where he had been sitting, and then sit down again a little further away, and then he should remark, 'No-one has passed by for as long as I have been sitting here.'¨†† The story is clearly meant to demonstrate the wit and quick-thinking of the *´ayyar*, but the implied commitment to veracity is also highly typical.

This seemingly innocuous virtue is in fact key in understanding the kind of power that the *futuwwa* represented. I mentioned in the previous subsection the similarity between the *futuwwa* ethical code and that of modern insurrectionary movements. The same can be said of this commitment to truth telling, even at the expense of one's life – the *fityan* were sometime instructed to speak the truth even to sultans and figures of authority, and even at the risk of their own lives.

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* Mahjub, in: Lewinsohn 1999 p. 566.

† Amer 2009.

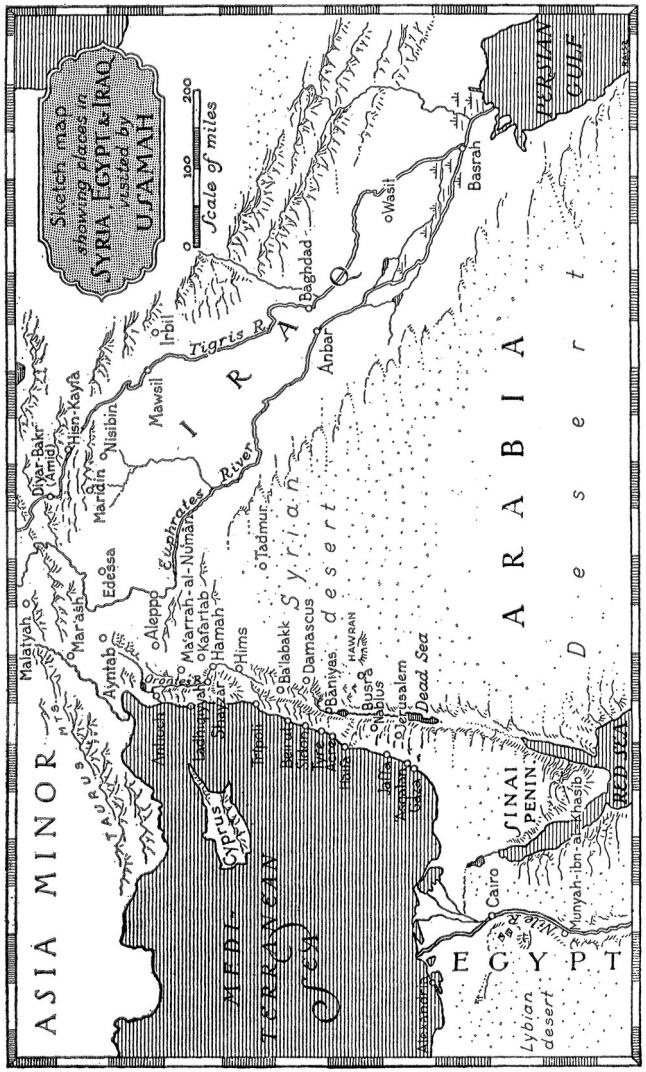
‡ Ridegon 2010 p. 83.

§ Rouayheb 2019.

** In fact the *only* reference I´ve encountered in my research to the *´ayyar* engaged in sexual assault was a case of a young novice being assaulted by his elders – Tor 2007 pp. 264-265. While the story appears in a collection of satirical and highly provocative tales, and thus cannot be considered historically reliable in any way, it is probably indicative of how *'ayyar* internal dynamics were viewed by contemporary outsiders. For a counter-example, of an *'ayyar* protecting a boy from being handed over to the sultan – presumably for sexual purposes - see Tor 2007 p. 232.

†† Ridgeon 2010 p. 20.

On an individual basis, such a commitment seems excessive. Most people, both then and now, would agree that it is permissible to lie in order to save one's life. But the *futuwwa* were, in this way and in many others, *not* individuals. The point of such stories is to demonstrate that the collective reputation of the *futuwwa* as a whole mattered more than the life of each individual member.



Global Spread

Partly thanks to its adoption by the sufis, *futuwwa* – both as an ideal and as a social institution – spread far and wide beyond its place of origin in modern-day Iran and Iraq.

* * *

In **Anatolia** (now in Turkey), a virtually identical movement to that of the *futuwwa* emerged under the name of ¨*akhis*¨ [¨brothers¨]. This was probably developed by Turkish mercenaries who had served in the mainlands of Islam during the formative period of *futuwwa*, and carried the model with them to their places of origin.* The *akhis* were an incredibly powerful and influential force in Anatolian cities throughout the Middle Ages. The 14th century traveller Ibn Battuta provides many accounts of his encounters with the Turkish *akhis* and with the *futuwwa*, and he singled out the *akhis* for their generous hospitality:†

> Nowhere in the world have I seen men more chivalrous in conduct than they are. The people of Shiraz and Isfahan can compare with them in their conduct, but these are more affectionate to the wayfarer and show him more honour and kindness.‡

Elsewhere,

> Ibn Battuta describes how one of the *fityan* from Anatolia, who was ‘wearing shabby clothes and had a felt bonnet on his head’, invited the traveler and his companions to a meal. Surprised, Ibn Battuta remarked, ‘This is a poor man, and he has not the means to entertain us and we do not like to impose a burden on him.’ Ibn Battuta’s associate replied, ‘He is one of the shaykhs of the Young *Akhis*. He is a cobbler, and a man of

* Goshgarian 2013.
† Ahmad 2017.
‡ Ridgeon 2011 p. 14.

> generous disposition. His associates number about two hundred men of different trades, who have elected him as their leader and have built a hospice to entertain guests in, and all that they earn by day they spend by night.*

Yet other sources also emphasize, in another form of continuity between the *akhis* and the '*ayyar* and *fityan*, that the *akhis* could also be a politically disruptive force, getting into fights among different groups and guilds and causing ¨commotion in the cities.¨†

* * *

Bands of *fityan* are found to be operating in **Cairo** and other Egyptian cities from the 12th century onward. They had their own urban houses in the working class neighborhoods to live in, train in martial arts, and fraternize. They were also closely associated with rural hunting lodges, where they would gather, alongside guests, to hold lavish banquets and parties.

The Egyptian *fityan*, perhaps more than any other local manifestation of the phenomenon, were the target of much criticism by their contemporaries. We've already seen one example in the admonition of the Egyptian al-Mursi against a *fata* on the true nature of *futuwwa*. An even clearer example is in the writings of al-Turkumani (d. 749/1348), who in the late 13th and early 14th centuries wrote several texts devoted to condemning *futuwwa*.

> *futuwwa* is something that angers God and delights Satan, for it fosters crime and sedition. The young men in *futuwwa* lodges organize themselves into militias. They learn to become handy with knives, and if one of their number should be apprehended and taken off to prison they will mass and organize to rescue him.‡

Elsewhere al-Turkumani and his contemporaries accused the *fityan* of accepting non-Muslims and homosexuals into their ranks, and of engaging in wine-drinking, secular singing and fornication. As we'll see later on, in Egypt more than anywhere else *futuwwa* had a remarkably long life span, with remnants of it surviving in the criminal underworld up to the mid-20th century.

* * *

Farther west, in the **Maghreb** (North Africa) and **al-Andalus** (the Iberian peninsula), the transimission of *futuwwa* seems to have been carried almost entirely by sufi scholars and travelers. As a result, the version of *futuwwa* which developed there was almost entirely intellectual and individual, completely divorced from the social institutions which gave rise to it.

By far the best illustration of this is the writings of Ibn al-'Arabi, the most influential sufi scholar of the period. On the one hand, *fityan* feature prominently in the mystical writings of al-'Arabi. Yet ibn 'Arabi's formulation of futuwwa is so distinctly legalistic and statist that he seems at times to almost reverse the original meaning of the term. To quote him,

> The reality of *futuwwa* is for a person to prefer the legislated knowledge that God places on the tongues of the messengers over the lower desires of his own soul and over the proofs of his intellect, remaining free from the rule of his own thought or opinions when it opposes the knowledge of the appointed lawgiver of his [age]. That is a *fata*. When faced with legislated knowledge, he is like a corpse in the hands of the body-washer.

As a result, when al-'Arabi travelled to Cairo in 598/1200 and met an actually existing band of *fityan* there, he was far from impressed.

> Instead of sincere spiritual aspirants, he says that he met men 'with no feelings of shame before the All-Merciful,' who dressed themselves in 'the gowns worn by *fityans*, while neglecting all question of obligatory

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* Ridgeon 2011 p. 89 n. 45.
† Afshari, in: Papas 2020 pp. 94-95; Goshgarian 2013.
‡ Irwin 2004 p. 164.

and supererogatory acts.' 'They would not be fit,' he adds, 'even to clean latrines.'*

The gap between the institutional sufi understanding of *futuwwa* and the more popular version of the *fityan* themselves, including its class dimensions, could not be clearer.

* * *

Finally, Historians have been speculating on the possible influence of *futuwwa* ideals on the concept of chivalry in **Christian Europe** since the 1940s.† While there is no archival ¨smoking gun¨ to illustrate such an influence, there are plenty of circumstantial hints to point to it. European knights could have encountered '*ayyar* and *fityan* in a variety of ways – we know there was significant cultural exchange in al-Andalus and on the borders between Byzantium and the caliphate, for example, with Muslims, Jews and Christians translating each others' written and oral traditions. To take one example - the idea of the ¨holy grail¨ might have originated in the *futuwwa* initiation ritual of communal drinking from a communal cup, as we know that the author of the first Christian depiction of a holy grail had read a sufi text depicting this ceremony.‡

Another fascinating account of a shared chivalric ideal is in the memoir of the 11th century Syrian nobleman Usama ibn Munqidh. Among many depictions of his friendships and rivalries with the ¨*faranji*¨ [European] crusaders, ibn Munqidh also gives us a depiction of a ¨devil of a brigand¨ by the name of al-Zamarrakal:

> Behold, they were an old man in a woman's clothing, accompanied by another man. Husam-al-Dawlah (may Allah's mercy rest upon his soul!), who was an excellent man, full of fun, said to the old man, 'O sheikh, what dost thou here?' The latter replied, 'I wait until it is dark and then appropriate for myself, through Allah's aid, some of the horses of these unbelievers.' Husim-al-Dawlah asked, 'And dost thou, O sheikh, cut off the ropes to detach their horses with thy teeth?' 'No,' replied the old man, 'rather with this knife.' And saying this he drew out of his waist a knife tied to a string and shining like a torch of fire. The man had no trousers [*sarawil*] on.§

Knives and *sarawil* were both part of the ritual dress of the *fityan*. Al-Munqidh seems to be implying here that al-Zamarrakal was a mere brigand and *not* a *fata*. In any case the account shows that Arab noble warriors familiar with *futuwwa* were part of a shared social milieu with European crusaders, just as those were formulating their own model of chivalry.**

* Zargar 2020 p. 52.

† Salinger 1950.

‡ The specific transmission of this idea might have been through the *futuwwa*-inspired sufi mystical text, the *Ikhwan al-Sifa* [¨brothers of purity¨], which we know influenced the author of the first literary depiction of a holy grail – see Kinoshita 2008.

§ Al-Munqidh 1987 p. 71.

** At one point al-Munqidh describes his *faranji* friend offering to take his son to Europe so he could ¨learn wisdom and chivalry,¨ and idea mocks considering his quite negative views on the barbarous social norms and etiquette of the *faranji*. Al-Munqidh 1987 p. 161

The Gender of Futuwwa

The social institutions of *'ayyar* and *futuwwa* belong to what social scientists call ¨homosocial¨ institutions, meaning that they were largely composed of men and reflected male bonds and solidarity. We have already seen some exceptions to this rule, and I will show more such exceptions, but that these are exceptions is quite clear – virtually every account of historical bands of *fityan* describe them as composed of young men. Women were part of both their cultural milieu and their ideological discourse, but they were not, generally speaking, able to join as full members.

Indeed, several authors on *futuwwa* made this gender segregation quite explicit. Thus in Suhrawardi's guide to *futuwwa* he states:

> *Futuwwa* is not for the hermaphrodite, and neither for a woman, because the two are equal. The hermaphrodite is the person who is neither a man nor a woman, and is imputed to [engage] in shameful acts, which are despised among men. And there is no *futuwwat* for women because the prophet said, “They are incomplete in intelligence and in religion.”*

Suhrawardi's deeply mysogynistic *futuwwa* is also expressed elsewhere, as when he instructs the *fityan* on how to punish a member who has broken three of his promises:

> Paint and decorate his hands with henna, just like a woman, anoint his eyebrows and lashes with collyrium, and wrap colourful, fine linen around his head and give [him] a report [which] says, 'You did not have the strength [to endure] the way of the *futuwwat* of the *jawanmardan*. Thrice you broke your promise. Now you fallen to the level of a wicked woman.'†

Yet Suhrawardi is also one of the most extreme examples of an attempt to subsume *futuwwa* under the control of a state. Other authors on the topic offer a much more nuanced view, one in which the virtues of *futuwwa* are absolutely available to women. Al-Sulami (d. 412/1034), the author of the very first sufi treatment of *futuwwa*, for instance, depicted women on numerous occasions as upstanding examples of *futuwwa*. Thus, when aiming to demonstrate the virtue of love and fraternity, he uses the example of a married couple's devotion to one another.‡

We have already seen in the case of Samak the *'Ayyar* an example of a legendary folk depiction of female *'ayyar* and *fityan*. There are many other examples – not enough to suggest that women could regularly become members of *futuwwa* bands, but enough to show that the gender order of actually existing *fityan* was a lot messier than that depicted in the *futuwwa* manuals. We know women were very much part of the social milieu of the urban *fityan*, and that they participated in many of their social gatherings and artistic pursuits. Another probably mythical story depicts a ¨girl disguised as a boy¨ who is sent to join the ranks of the *'ayyars* of Nuh in an attempt to test his chastity, a test he of course passes.§

Again, stories like these probably do not represent a widespread phenomenon. There is, to the best of my knowledge, only a single historically documented case of a female *fatat*, and this comes from the criminal gangs of *futuwwa* in 20th century – 'Aziza al-Fahla, who was known for, among other things, beating British soldiers.**

It might be important that this coincides with the only case of a fully criminalized and working-class version of militarized *futuwwa* we have documentation of. Does it suggest that the more counter-hegemonic version of *futuwwa* in previous generations were also more inclusive of women, a fact that simply went unrecorded anywhere accept in folk tales and legends? Perhaps not, but the possibility cannot be ruled out.

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* Afshari, in: Papas 2020 p. 92.

† Suhrawardi, in: Ridgeon 2011 p. 64.

‡ Al-Sulami 1983 p. 61.

§ Tor 2007 p. 232; on Nuh see section ¨Between Sufis and *fityan*.¨

** Jacob 2007.

Futuwwa and the state

'Ayyar and *fityan* both appear in the historical accounts of the Middle Ages as independent military forces. While the more institutionally-inclined witnesses often describe them as politically disruptive, engaging in robbery, property destruction and other crimes, it's also clear that they could just as easily act as defenders of their communities against outside threats, including those of invading armies and states. We've already seen an example of this in the case of the defense of Baghdad from the 'Abassid army.*

The sources are sometimes reluctant to acknowledge this role for the *'ayyar* and *fityan*. The same cannot be said of another form of urban militia, the *ahdath*. These seem to have represented a kind of state-sponsored *futuwwa*, following the same moral code and ritual elements, but also subordinated to elite leadership. The distinction between *fityan* and *ahdath* was not always clear, however, and many accounts use the terms interchangeably.

> References to the *fityan* abound for the cities of 'Iraq and Syria in the Umayyad period. They appear as organized groups wearing distinct clothing, were trusted by the city officials, and in many cases seem to have been identical with the *ahdath* militias. Thus when a certain *Khariji* [religious dissident] was killed by a police officer in Basra under 'Ubayd Allah b. Ziyad, the *Khawarij* sent someone disguised in 'the garment of the fityan' to lull him into their hideout and kill him.†

To make things even more complicated, sometimes it is the *ahdath* themselves who feature as the socially-disruptive element, while the local population is forced to recruit its own force of volunteer fighters to mount a defense.

> In the year 201/816f, the *mutaṭawwiʿa* devoted themselves to commanding the good and forbidding evil. The reason for this was that the dissolute of Baghdad and the *shuttar*‡ troubled the people greatly, manifested evildoing, cut off the road, and seized women and youths openly. They would seize a man's son and his family, without his being able to prevent them from doing this; and they would plunder the villages without there being any ruler to prevent them and take them in hand, *for he [i. e. the ruler] would egg them on, and they were his intimate associates*. They would seize passersby on the road, and no one aided against them, so that the people were in great affliction because of them.¨§

It´s clear that we are witnessing here a contest between different factions over control of the means of violence – that is, precisely the process which defined, according the sociologist Max Weber, the formation of the modern state. In this contest, *'ayyar* and *fityan* probably represented a more localized force based in the urban neighborhoods in which they were located, while foreign armies and their ruling dynasties were, as a rule, far less beholden to the local population.

As a result, we find numerous occasions, starting from the very beginning of the emergence of *futuwwa*, of attempts by various Islamic states to suppress the phenomenon. The very first example of such banning dates all the way back to the very first emergence of the urban *futuwwa*, when Khalid al-Qasri (d. 126/743), the Ummayad governor of Baghdad, ¨totally prohibited these gatherings, making an exception for only one person by the name of Hunayn Hayri, whom he allowed to hold assemblies on the condition that neither adolescents nor anti-governmental elements be admitted to them.¨**

Another later example from Baghdad appears in the historical work of al-Qadi Abu 'Ali al-Muhassin bin 'Ali Tanukhi, and shows a simultaneous attack on both *'ayyars* and sufis:

> The commonalty of Baghdad was stirred up ... civil disorder grew mighty, so [al-Muhallabī] seized a group of the *'ayyars* and bearers of knives, put them in covered boats, conveyed them to Birūdh, and jailed them there... Talk of these occurrences increased in the mosques, and [among] the heads of the Sufis, so that [al-Muhallabī] feared a renewal

* See p. 5.
† Zakeri 1995 p. 187.
‡ Something like ¨hoodlums¨ or ¨toughs.¨
§ Tor 2007 p. 76.
** Mahjub, in: Lewinsohn 1999 pp. 564-565.

> of the conflict. So he arrested a group of [the Sufi leaders] and jailed them, fetched Abū al-Sā'ib, the chief qāḍī [judge] ... and a group of the qāḍīs, and the witnesses, and the *fuqahā'* – I was among them – in order to reprove them; and the members of the police, that we might believe in their harmfulness [viz. , of the Sufi leaders], when the proofs were shown against them.*

This is not to say that *´ayyar* and *fityan* were always and everywhere counter-hegemonic forces. As already mentioned, *fityan* and especially *ahdath* sometimes represented an early attempt by the ruling elites to co-opt such forces under their control. There in fact several historical cases where *'ayyar* and *fityan* managed to accrue enough local power to become themselves the basis of dynastic states. One such example is the *'ayyar* dynasty of the saffarids in Sistan in the 9th and 10th centuries. The founder of the dynasty, Ya'qub bin al-Layth, is consistently described as both an *'ayyar* and a *fata.* Al-Layth began his life as a coppersmith, but left his home to become a religiously-devout warrior and brigand, until he managed to fight off the Umayyads and take control of Sistan. His dynasty, however, did not last long, and within a single generation the Saffarids were defeated by the 'Abassids.

In other cases, much like the *ahdath*, state rulers recruited *'ayyar* and *fityan* to serve as security forces.

> In the year 327/938f., we are told, Ibn Rā'iq appointed one of his officers, Ibn Yazdād, over the *shurṭa*, or police force, in Baghdad. The latter, in turn, ... appointed a group of the *'ayyars*, gave them many dīnārs ... received them favourably and promised them whatever they wished. Then he sent to Abū'l-Qāsim al-Kalwadhānī and took from him money that he had gathered for the caliph; and the *'ayyars* ruled over the city.†

By far the most important example of co-optation of *futuwwa* by a state took place in the 12th century, however. Under the 'Abassid Caliph al-Nasir. In fact al-Nasir's *futuwwa* policy represents both an example of co-optation and of suppression – on the one hand, he publicly initiated himself into the *futuwwa* order, and declared himself the ¨head¨ of all *fityan*. At the same time, he banned all *futuwwa* groups not directly subject to his control. He also enlisted a leading sufi leader, ʿUmar al-Suhrawardi (d. 632/1234), to legitimate this centralization process by writing *futuwwa* manuals that specifically emphasized the importance of a rigid hierarchy among the *fityan* and the need for subordination to authority.‡

All of this was obviously quite foreign to the anti-authoritarian spirit of *futuwwa*, and it's therefore not surprising that we find numerous conflicts emerging between the *fityan* and the state even when the two were supposedly on good terms. Thus we find numerous instances of *fityan* and *ahdath* supposedly under the control of the state getting into violent clashes with the standing army§ or violently freeing their brethren from incarceration. In one example from 10th century Damascus,

> the Fatimid governor had just been driven out. The *ahdath* had gained control of the city, and 'the nobility could exercise no authority in relation to them, nor could government command their obedience.' When, therefore, Alftakln drew near the city, the nobles [*ashraf*] and elders [*shuyukh*] went to him and asked him to stay with them, rule their city, and “relieve them from the harm done by the ahdath.” Alftakln “took their oath to obey and help him; and he swore to protect them from being harmed either by himself or by any other.“ He uprooted “the destructive elements“ and drove off the bedouins; and “all the people were in awe of his authority “ and “gladly obeyed him.“**

The unmistakable statist bent of the text should not blind us to the fact that the ahdath, alongside the bedouin, are clearly depicted here as a popular and counter-hegemonic force.

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* Tor 2007 pp. 239-240

† Tor 2007 p. 266.

‡ Ridgeon, in: Chiabotti et al 2016 pp. 388; Ohlander 2008.

§ Mottahedeh 1980 p. 182-3.

** Mottahedeh 1980 p. 176.

In the long term, however, the various Islamic states did manage to end the existence of *fityan* and *´ayyar* as independent fighting forces. The *´ayyar* pretty much disappear from view in this process; *fityan*, on the other hand, proved a lot more resilient. Many *fityan* made the transition to urban professional guilds. In the late Middle Ages we begin finding numerous references to *futuwwa* as an ethos of such urban guilds. Many of these guilds produced manuals for their members which survive to this day. These manuals show that the guilds, while abandoning the martial aspect of *futuwwa*, maintained much of its ritual aspects, as well as most of its moral worldview. There are such *futuwwa* manuals for a huge variety of professions, including ¨textile makers, butchers, cobblers, cooks, barbers, masseurs, messengers, feltmakers, bakers, cloth makers, skinners, bath attendants, archers, soldiers and water bearers.¨* According to Ibn Battuta´s description of the guilds in Isfahan,

> The different guilds used to invite each other´s members to their special banquets, at which each would give proof of its dignity by displaying valuable chattels, such as dishes, which belonged to it.†

The shift from warriors to artisan was not a uni-directional one, and we find artisan guilds, still clearly influenced by *futuwwa* ethics, joining in fighting whenever the city which they inhabit comes under external threat. Thus, the members of several of the guilds of Harrat putting up resistance against Mongol invaders, and smuggling food into the city while it was being besieged.‡

In any case, Not all *fityan* accepted the efforts of the state to co-opt and disarm them. Some chose to uphold the military aspect of their way of life. Such groups went underground, becoming an essential part of the criminal underworld in many Islamic cities. Remarkably, representations of such bands of *futuwwa* dating all the way to the 20th century suggest that such criminal *fityan* maintained some of the moral code of their ancestors. No less of an authority than Naguib Mahfouz dedicated a significant part of his novels to *futuwwa* criminal gangs in Cairo, depicting them as noble albeit tragic petty thieves. How this happened is difficult to discern, since the criminalized *futuwwa* no longer drew the support and admiration of contemporary scholars, meaning that the evidence on their worldview is extremely scarce.§

All of this brings to mind the thesis of sociologist Charles Tilly, who argued in an influential article from the 1990s that, from a historical point of view, the difference between the modern state´s monopoly on the means of violence and what we now refer to as ¨organized crime¨ is one of degree and not of quality.**

The *futuwwa* appear as a perfect illustration of this. As a source of popular, anarchic organized means of violence, they could not co-exist with the Islamic states for long. They were forced either to become the state themselves or to lay down their arms. Any attempt to maintain their independence led them towards direct conflict with the state and ultimately towards annihilation.

* Ridgeon 2010 p. 127.
† Keyvani 1982 p. 35.
‡ Keyvani 1982 pp. 33-34.
§ Irwin 2004.
** Tilly 1992.

Authority, Discipline, and Leadership

It´s perhaps on the topic of the internal structure of the *fityan* where the problematic nature of the sources is most evident. We know frustratingly little about the structure of the *'ayyar* and of the urban *fityan* groups. There are many allusions in the sources to the *'ayyar* as holding a deep distrust of authority, which might suggest a high level of egalitarianism among them. In this they were specifically distinct from regular soldiers employed in the standing armies of medieval states.

> In the soldier, generosity, hospitality, open-handedness, gratitude, chastity and the condition of being abundantly armed should be present in a higher degree than in the rest of mankind, but while a cavilling tongue, regard for self, obedience and submission to command are merits in a soldier, they are faults in an *ʿayyār.*[*]

And in another account on the 9th century scholar Abū Ḥafṣ al-Naysābūrī:

> When Abū Ḥafṣ said to al-Junayd: 'If you came to Nīshāpūr we would teach you what futuwwa is,' it was said to him: 'What [kind of behaviour] did you see from him?' He said: 'He made my friends subordinates [*mukhannathīn*], he was imposing upon them all sorts [of things]; *futuwwa*, on the contrary, renounces imposition.'[†]

The sources do often refer to leaders among the *'ayyar*, but they are also quite clear that these leaders were chosen democratically elected by their peers, and could be replaced when they failed to meet the expectations of their brethren.

> When Dirham's companions saw his weakness and his impotence [as a military leader], they agreed upon Yaʿqūb b. al-Layth, and they transferred the rule over them to him, because of what they saw of his organizational skills, his good policy, and his concerning himself with their affairs. When this became clear to Dirham, he did not contend with [Yaʿqūb] for rule, but rather surrendered it to him, and was deposed from [power].[‡]

Importantly, such democratic model of leadership was precisely one of the aspects the *'ayyar* lost when they became enrolled in state apparatus. In the very same example given above of Ya'qub al-Layth, after he establishes his *'ayyar*-led state in Tabaristan, his brother inherits the role but fails to perform it to the same degree of success due to his indulgence in ¨wine-drinking and was occupied [solely] with merry-making and festivities.¨ This failure of leadership, which is no longer checked by his accountability to his fellow *'ayyar*, leads to the fall of the short-lived dynasty.

Something similar might have happened with the transition from politically independent mercenary bands to state-sanctioned orders and guilds among the urban *fityan*. The rituals of initiation depicted in some of the literary accounts still point to a high degree of egalitarianism – the novice would be fitted with the same set of ritual dress as all the other members, and all would drink from the same goblet filled with salt water.

The sufi manuals on *futuwwa* do describe a rather strict hierarchy among the *fityan*. This hierarchy closely follows the structure of the ¨sobre¨ sufi orders, based largely on age and experience, starting from the novice and ending in the master of *futuwwa*. Many of these manuals also make it quite clear that the novice is expected to always adhere to his superiors' instructions, and some even list punishments for insubordination – ranging from mild corporeal punishment (like lashings) to excommunication. Since all of these manuals are associated with the project of subsuming the *futuwwa* orders under state authority, it's hard to tell how much such regulations reflect the reality of the relationship among the *fityan*, and how much they were imposed from above. Certainly it's hard to square such depictions with the earliest accounts of the pleasure-seeking urban communes which first popularized the concept.

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* Tor 2007 p. 248.

† Tor 2007 p. 194.

‡ Ridgeon 2010 p. 147.

Conclusion

At first glance, it might appear that the *futuwwa* phenomenon has little relevance for our current historical age. *Futuwwa* clearly reflected a response to political conditions which preceded the establishment of the modern state and its monopoly on organized violence. Under these conditions, any group which sought legitimacy from the community in which it operated had to ground its actions in a moral code which that community could understand and, just as importantly, trust in.

Futuwwa was precisely such a code. It served as a legitimating framework for a whole host of groups that were engaged in organized violence – righteous brigands, urban communes, and eventually, even cops and other agents of the state. As such, and despite its clear anti-authoritarian tendencies, it was not in itself a revolutionary force. Yet in its emphasis on personal liberty, social egalitarianism, and bodily autonomy, it prefigured a lot of what contemporary revolutionaries are working towards. At the same time, *futuwwa* also went beyond most contemporary revolutionary movements, by placing a great emphasis on the accountability of the fighters to their immediate surroundings.

Let me be blunt – most of our revolutionaries today need to re-learn this lesson. Too many of us think our political causes give us a free pass to treat those around us like shit. We barricade ourselves from the wider community, waiting for the day they will come knocking at our doors to beg for our help. That day is not coming. Popular power cannot be built without a strong social basis, and that basis is built on a foundation of long-term trust. That means we need to be decent people before we can hope to organize a true alternative. The alternative will emerge from our efforts to be of use to our community, not from increasingly intricate revolutionary programs and manifestos.

Not everything the *fityan* did can or should be replicated. We probably don't need more male homosocial institutions than we already have (except for gay sex, we can keep that part). We also need a stronger anti-state ideological commitment to prevent co-optation, and a better system to ensure accountability against abuse and exploitation. But many of the *futuwwa* virtues seem to me to be not only incredibly timeless, but even more urgent to replicate today. Let's throw more parties to which everyone is invited – yes, even those boring bougie neighbors with an office job and the two kids. Let's make immigrants and refugees *actually* feel welcome, not just with a sticker but with actual attention to their material and spiritual needs. This will require us to be more flexible in our forms of sociability, but honestly, I think we're all pretty bored with ketamine and techno raves, aren't we?

Futuwwa is not about being more-radical-than-thou, it's about resiliency and long-term trust. In order not to be susceptible to the state's claim to be the only thing stopping us from killing and assaulting each other, we need to show ourselves and each other that we deserve that trust. And that means being humble. It means being generous with whatever we have to share. It means being honest, sometimes brutally so. It means not exploiting those we have power over for whatever reason. In other words, it means being *futuwwa*.

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